

6 Integrating the language aspects of intercultural competencies into language for specific purposes programmes

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Abstract

Business schools and their foreign language departments are expected to support their students in the transition from the academic sphere into the world of work, where non-domain skills including intercultural competencies have gained importance in degree jobs. To react to labour market trends, the Institute of Business Communication and Professional Language Studies decided to offer courses of intercultural skills with the aim of preparing students for appropriate and effective communication in an international environment. This is to be achieved by developing open, conscious, and adaptable behaviour and also by the acquisition of the linguistic and non-language elements of intercultural communication. Students should know how information is conveyed both in their mother tongue and the target language (explicit and subtle ways of expressing thoughts, potential areas of misunderstanding). The paper also deals with the benefits business organisations can gain by possessing intercultural competencies.

Keywords: intercultural skills, labour market, translation, effective communication.

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1. Introduction

A marked characteristic of the current labour market is the increasing need for adaptable competencies. Apart from the desired qualification, employers require universal, non-domain competencies that are not specific to certain jobs. Intercultural skills form part of the selection process in an indirect way, often as part of complex assignments. Furthermore, a lot of students aspire to undertake scholarships or research work abroad. These trends have inspired the Institute to launch courses in intercultural competencies with the aim of enabling students to study or work efficiently in a multinational environment. At the Faculty of Economics and Business, Debrecen University, intercultural studies and skills are part of the Business English programme at Bachelor of the Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Science (BSc) level, and as independent subjects they are taught at master level. A shorter programme for science students of other faculties (*Intercultural skills for science students at master level*) and two more complex subjects (*Intercultural studies for technical translators* and *Intercultural language skills for translators*) for technical translators of business have been designed. When compiling the content of the courses, research results and human resources experts' experience have both been considered.

2. Intercultural competencies in the labour market

The growth of soft skills, e.g. global citizenship, professional ethics, problem solving, or team work was predicted by a business research organisation, [DeakinCo \(2017\)](#) who carried out their research among key industry experts. According to this forecast, soft skill-intensive occupations will have accounted for two thirds of all jobs and soft skill intensive jobs will have grown 2.5 times faster than other jobs by 2030 ([DeakinCo, 2017](#)).

Due to the growing significance of cultural factors affecting the quality of the relationship between economic players, there has been a shift towards non-economic factors, e.g. intercultural competences ([Fornalska & Skurczynski, 2014](#)).

According to Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), intercultural sensitivity can predetermine an individual's ability to work efficiently with people from other cultures. They state that people must be interested in other cultures and out of respect to these cultures they have to adapt or modify their behaviour. The affective aspect of intercultural sensitivity, the cognitive aspect of intercultural awareness and the behavioural aspect of intercultural effectiveness as described by Chen and Starosta (1996) are of special importance when we prepare our students for the challenges of the future labour market.

Cross-cultural competencies serve the interest of recent graduates in finding a job as these skills are beneficial for the organisations which employ them. Customer satisfaction and customer loyalty generate company success, and these goals cannot be reached without smooth and effective communication with the clients. This includes the clear wording of contracts, the accurate comprehension and completion of orders, and first of all building and maintaining relationships through amiable negotiations, which all require a thorough knowledge of other cultures (Thitthongkam, Walsh, & Banchapattanasakda, 2010).

Finding the financial and business benefits of possessing cross-cultural communication competencies was the aim of an extensive survey involving more than 300 big companies on four continents and identified the following yields:

- acquiring new customers through openness to and respect for other cultures,
- a better understanding of differing viewpoints and ways of thinking,
- improved handling of conflicts,
- more effective teamwork, and
- growing trust in the company and thus enhanced reputation.

Adaptation to different cultural settings and adjusting discourse accordingly, furthermore, being aware of one's own cultural biases and conduct were also mentioned as important (British Council, 2013). In an earlier research project conducted by the EU on the financial gains of having foreign language and intercultural skills, numerical benefits and losses were targeted, and 18 percent of the questioned business organisations identified cooperation problems due to cultural differences and misunderstandings (Hagen et al., 2006).

3. Curriculum for intercultural courses

3.1. Curriculum goals

The desired outcome of the subject is borrowed from Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model: to communicate effectively and appropriately in an intercultural situation using one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Ideally students develop empathy, adaptability, and consciousness. Regarding attitude, the key words of training are respect and openness. In the one semester master programme for science students, the aim is to clarify culture specific language points, for example the choice of words, ways of expressing oneself, and style of writing. Furthermore, students should also be aware of the differences in behaviour and attitude.

The faculty also offers a four semester programme for technical translators which involves a subject of intercultural studies and another subject for intercultural language skills. The purpose of teaching intercultural studies for would-be translators is providing them with the key drivers in native speakers' way of thinking appearing in communication. For example, when the love of freedom and democracy appears in the language in the form of offering the speaker several choices to express his way of looking at things, this is new to an Eastern European student. The *Intercultural language skills for translators* course involves more sophisticated issues as well, such as the confident application of associations, connotations, and transmission of political views with minimal loss in meaning.

3.2. Content elements of the curriculum

3.2.1. Intercultural skills for science students at master level

Based on the above mentioned consideration points, the following curriculum has been compiled for master students of natural sciences.

Non-language elements:

- cultures (definition, components, characteristics, classifications);
- intercultural communication ethics (awareness, respect, empathy, tolerance);
- major attitude themes (time, punctuality, degrees of politeness, formality, being open);
- non-verbal intercultural communication (gestures, mimics, eye-contact, the value of silence, dress code); and
- potential areas of intercultural conflicts.

Most students are aware that political views and religious beliefs should be avoided in a business conversation but they need to be warned of some further dangerous topics, such as ethnic jokes or country-sensitive historic or military topics. Learning the cultural roots of certain patterns of behaviour or attitudes helps to remember them, as in the saying ‘consider the past, you’ll know the present’.

Students are especially interested in the life of their peers in other cultures or the way they are learning foreign languages. As European teenagers prefer learning through ‘user experiences’ they are always surprised at the strict or sometimes rigid way Japanese schoolchildren study. Glossary booklets teaching foreign language words with translations and example sentences to be memorised have

always been fashionable in Japan. Europeans would probably find this method of learning too boring (Szirmai & Czellér, 2014).

Linguistic parts in the curriculum:

- differences between high and low context languages;
- ways of keeping or altering reality;
- emotional or rational, sometimes flowery, ways of speaking;
- short or long ways of expressing thoughts;
- taboos in conversation, ethnic jokes;
- ways of asking, requesting;
- degrees of directness;
- degrees of loudness;
- the importance of small talks;
- the language of numbers – trillion, billion, decimal point; and
- units of measurement.

When we introduce a culture from the aspect of the language, first of all we need to tell whether it is an explicit or subtle language. Do they say what they think or does the listener have to decode the meaning because part of the message is hidden?

As English is a lingua franca which is used for communication between non-native speakers as well, speakers of English should also be aware of the peculiarities of cultures outside the Anglo-Saxon world. Without background information, one might not understand them or misunderstandings may occur. Apart from the typical British understatement, native speakers of English tend to speak in a straightforward, direct way to avoid misunderstandings and uncertainties. When they give information it is explicit, concrete, detailed, but at the same time accurate. When classifying cultures, one can establish that native speakers of English are more unambiguous than for example Asian people with their very polite sentences or Mexicans with their diminutives. However, examining different areas of the Anglo-Saxon world one can notice differences in the way of speaking and this requires careful interpretation. To correctly understand British speakers we need to know that politeness is a key concept in British

language and culture and this leads to nicer ways of wording things, very often in the form of euphemisms and understatements. Due to this, intonation and mimicry gain special importance. We all know how many different meanings the word *interesting* can convey.

Paying attention to the intonation and being conscious about the special characteristics of a language can support appropriate interpretation. The same refers to the various meanings of the word *yes* in the Japanese language. All this shows that the introduction of high and low context cultures needs to be an essential part of the curriculum. Students should know if the language they study conveys meaning through codes or context, or how precise information giving is. The most important point is how direct or straightforward speakers are or if the listener has to guess or deduct background information. If we look at the items in the Anglo-EU Translation Guide (Table 1), we can see that most of them are exaggerations, but that is why students will surely remember them and learn that in some cultures they cannot interpret utterances literally. In employment situations, serious misunderstandings or conflicts may arise from being unaware of the secondary or hidden meanings of phrases or statements.

Table 1. Anglo-EU translation guide³

What the British say	What the British mean	What others understand
You must come for dinner	It's not an invitation. I am just being polite	I will get an invitation soon
I almost agree	I don't agree at all	He's not far from agreement
I only have a few minor comments	Please re-write it completely	He has found a few typos
Could we consider some other options?	I don't like your idea	They have not yet decided
I will bear it in mind	I've forgotten it already	They will probably do it
Very interesting	That is clearly nonsense	They are impressed
I was a bit disappointed that...	I am annoyed that	It doesn't really matter
That's not bad	That's good	That's poor
I am sure it's my fault	It's your fault	Why do they think it was their fault?

3. https://www.reddit.com/r/CasualUK/comments/80kskd/angloeu_translation_guide/

3.2.2. *Intercultural studies for technical translators*

The Faculty of Economics and Business offers a master programme for would-be translators of economics and business who are at C1 level (Common European Framework of Reference) when starting the two-year-course with 644 contact hours and a complex final exam. This programme involves two subjects of intercultural communication: a theoretical one called *Intercultural studies for technical translators*, and a more practical one entitled *Intercultural language skills for technical translators*. The list below includes those topics which are not taught in the non-translation courses. These are mainly management issues: intercultural differences and conflicts in management.

Course elements:

- interrelationships between organisational and national cultures in multinational companies;
- cultural diversity in management; and
- globalisation and localisation.

3.2.3. *Intercultural language skills for technical translators*

Students of the technical translation course are all Business and Economics majors, and they have only studied the major events and trends in English or American history, civilisation or English-American literature and culture. Due to this, they need to get familiar with a lot of words and phrases whose meanings are rooted in the culture of the target language. These can be everyday words like *brunch*, *shawl*, *patio*, or *bungalow* or political words like *the Tories*, *the Blitz* or *the establishment*, or words from the world of sport such as *to touch base with someone*.

Course content (exclusively the extra topics compared to the non-translation courses):

- linguistic characteristics of professional communication (formality) in the source and target language; and
- culture specific words, phrases grouped by topic.

3.2.4. *Intercultural aspects in translation strategies*

Intercultural aspects in translation strategies do not form an independent subject in the translation teaching programme, but it is an important factor in the training of translators. From an intercultural point of view, the starting point for a translator is what he considers more determining: the similarities or differences of cultures. The next factor is what he regards primary: the text of the source language or that of the target language. Another significant point when evaluating translation is that one cannot have the same expectations of the source and the target language, as the background knowledge and the intentions of the creator, the translator, and the recipient are different. Furthermore, having the same impact as the source text cannot be the only criterion of a good translation, because the translation itself is only one of many factors (age, educational level, geographical location, etc.) influencing reception (Nida, 2000). Nida (2000) states that a good translator should equally be familiar with the culture and the language of the source and the target languages, as words can only convey meaning together with their cultural background. He also emphasises that the differences between the two cultures may generate more challenges for the translator than the differing language structures. This statement may sound like an exaggeration but it should be accepted that a thorough knowledge of the source and the target culture is a key factor in translation.

4. Conclusion

Intercultural competencies are key skills in translation and also in other degree-level jobs, and it is the role of the higher education institutions to prepare students for intercultural tasks arising in their studies or future work. Raising consciousness by highlighting the differences in cultures and the consequences of ignoring them

should be the first step of the teacher. Although the general aims of intercultural competency courses are the same, different curriculum content is needed for the training of translators and master students of science or business. Would-be translators need sophisticated knowledge of the cultures they are working with. Although company managers and human resource experts helped with the course design, an on-going development of the course content is needed to include new phenomena and expectations of the labour market and the experience of recent graduates. Because of this, a survey is being planned to receive feedback from former students who are employed in organisations with international activity.

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